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Lonnie Belz, left, and Casey O'Dell are trying to keep cemetery association alive.

Grave concern

Pair pumps life in Camas cemetery association

By WENDY REIF
The Columbian

CAMAS — On a rolling hillside high above the Columbia River, Lonnie Belz and Casey O'Dell spend many a day surrounded by hundreds of friends — all of them dead.

"He was the mayor when I worked for the fire department," said Belz, pointing to one headstone.

"Remember George Chapel — one of the first funerals I ever went to — 1915."

"All of those guys come back to me," said the 83-year-old Belz, pausing at graves in the Camas Cemetery. A member of the Camas Cemetery Association since 1949, he is fighting for its life.

When he joined the nine-member board, "I figured they were in a rut and it would take me just a few years to get them out," he said. Instead, it has become a running challenge to make the century-old cemetery pay for itself.

Faced with sluggish plot and burial sales and \$1,000-a-month summer water bills, the association might run in the red.

"We used to pay \$90 a month for water," said Belz, who helped install the sprinkling system in 1960.

"It's a matter of months before we'll have to form a cemetery district or turn it over to the city," said O'Dell, 82, cemetery association member since 1953.

The dedicated pair have made the upkeep and upgrading of the cemetery a virtual crusade.

The cemetery, platted in 1885, has been under the control of a non-profit association since 1920.

Repeated attempts to get the city to subsidize the water rates the past year have been unsuccessful.

The city, unable to give preferential treatment to the non-profit group, will not reduce the rate.

The best the city can offer is a slightly lower rate for late-night watering. But the association won't save anything by it because the one paid employee would have to work extra hours.

"The city is obligated," said O'Dell. "All other cities provide for the dead."

"We can struggle through for another year. The only way out is for the city to take it over, unless some funeral owner takes it over."

City officials don't really want control of the cemetery, for fear it would reap the same troubles the association has encountered. The current cemetery crisis is twofold:

- Newer, private cemeteries are taking away business. Only 16 people have been buried at the Camas Cemetery in the first six months of this year. In 1949, 50 to 60 a year were buried there.

- The association is a volunteer group with no source of revenue except the sale of plots and donations.

"None of the cemeteries — even Evergreen (Memorial Gardens) — claims they make money on the cemetery," Belz said. "They make their money on the chapel and selling stones."

The Camas Cemetery does neither.

Some cemeteries have a tax base through being in a cemetery district.

With the average cost of a plot and burial between \$600 and \$650 at the Camas Cemetery, the association can barely afford to pay its sexton a minimal salary. Twenty-five percent of that must go into an endowment fund. Between the water costs and fertilizer, the association must shovel out \$4,500 more a year.

"Each month you wonder if there's going to be enough," said part-time bookkeeper Joan Houts.

Water has become the main issue since last summer, when the picturesque cemetery was left to turn a depressing brown. Belz and

O'Dell, who supervise the sexton and spend some of their time weeding around tombstones, are intent upon watering the cemetery's 20-plus acres this summer.

To help raise money, the association ran a sale on plots — two for \$440, a savings of \$110 for a pair.

But Belz and O'Dell are worried about future years, when they join the friends and relatives whose graves they now saunter past.

"If we step out, it'll just go haywire," O'Dell said.

The pair visit the cemetery religiously, like a young couple monitoring the construction of a dream home. They are responsible for installing a sprinkling system, for saving the association money by changing to flat grave markers and for replacing an old shack with an office.

Every night O'Dell reads the vital statistics column in the newspaper and then calls Belz to tell him who's died and where they're getting buried.

They have checked out every other cemetery in the area and some in other states.

"We think we've got the best-looking cemetery in the country," said O'Dell. "Why go somewhere else when the fellows you worked with — all the friends and all the people who helped develop this town — are here?" asks Belz.

The trouble is no one cares anymore, they said.

Although there are about 2,000 members of the association (anyone who owns a plot is a member), no one showed at a recent meeting of the members except Belz and O'Dell.

"The average person doesn't want to talk about cemeteries," a disappointed O'Dell said.

But O'Dell and Belz, who eventually will be buried there, can hardly think of anything else.

Said O'Dell, "We can't get out of this thing until we get someone to take over."